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ABSTRACT

The authors attempt to increase understanding of the Chicano student in a community college setting. The attitudes and values of a counselor are very important in a counseling relationship; therefore, a counselor must be honest with himself in analyzing his own feelings about those who are different from himself. Many Chicano students enter community colleges with a definite identity crisis. They have been living in two cultures, believing that they must totally accept one and reject the other. A counselor has a responsibility to educate himself about the history and culture of the Mexican-American and to take an active part in helping students resolve their identity crises. In addition it is important for students to be encouraged to study the history and culture of the Mexican-American (i.e., Raza classes). (Author/PC)

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COUNSELING THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT

A Position Paper

by

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COUNSELING THE MEXICAN-AMERICAN STUDENT

I am Joaquin

I am Joaquin.
Lost in a world of confusion,
Caught up in a whirl of a gringo society,
Confused by the rules,
Scorned by attitudes,
Suppressed by manipulations
And destroyed by modern society.

My fathers
    Have lost the economic battle
And won
    The struggle of cultural survival.

And now!

    I must choose
        between
    the paradox of
    Victory of the spirit
    despite physical hunger
            or
    to exist in the grasp
    of American social neurosis,
    sterilization of the soul and
    a full stomach.

Rudolfo "Corky" Gonzales
1967

The above poem illustrates the state of confusion in which many of our Chicano students find themselves. If we are to really do our jobs as counselors, we must try to understand the student so we can accept him as an individual. It is well known that it is more difficult to empathize with those who are different from ourselves, and the counselor may find that the Chicano student, since he is from a different minority group, is harder to understand than the Anglo student. This paper is written with the hope that it will increase your understanding of the Chicano student.

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The attitudes and values of the counselor are very important in a counseling relationship. A counselor must be honest with himself in analyzing his own feelings about those who are different from himself. If a counselor finds himself in a setting working with culturally different individuals, he must take the responsibility of filling in the gaps in his training. He cannot sit back and apologize for his lack of training or delegate some of the counselor functions to para-professional aides, because that only reinforces the minority group's reserve and suspicion of the dominant culture.

The ideal counseling relationship should allow the student to express himself without ridicule, attack or moralization--giving him the right to see things his way. He should not have to continuously defend himself. The counselor should be able to listen in a non-evaluative way without passing judgements on the student.

Although these facts about counseling are applicable to all students, they are even more important for the Chicano student because of his unique set of circumstances. By being more real and human, the counselor can assist the student to recognize and utilize his human potentialities; to become more aware of himself. Counseling has no room for facades. Students do not reveal themselves to counselors who play a role, who operate behind a professional front. This means that the counselor must look at himself honestly and remove the barriers inside him which inhibit his ability to relate in a genuine manner.

Counseling can be very challenging to the counselor who wants to implement his belief in the dignity of man and his deep respect for the individual. Respect and the value of the individual are

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not determined by what he has done in the past, what test scores he has achieved, what clothes he wears, where he lives, how he speaks or what grades he has achieved. His value comes from the fact that he is alive and has the freedom to choose his own way of life.

As counselors, we must be willing to help a student develop as a person. This necessitates active communication on the part of both the counselor and the student. Communication as we know it is a two-way process. If we find a case where a counselor and a Mexican-American counselee are unable to communicate effectively, in most cases it would be erroneous to say that it was either the fault of the counselor or the student. Our position is that if a lack of understanding or a barrier to communication exists in community college counseling offices, it is definitely a two-fold problem. Both the counselor and the student share in the communication gap and both must work to bridge that gap.

Many Chicano students are entering our community colleges with a definite identity crisis. They have been living in two cultures believing that they must totally accept one and reject the other.

This crisis began with their initial contact with the school system. In most cases, and particularly in the rural schools, they entered kindergarten with a strong command of the Spanish language, a weak English vocabulary, the customs and beliefs relevant to their barrio, the diet of their culture, the values of their family and ethnic group, etc.

Upon entering school, they had to immediately disregard their language, legends and all other facets of their cultural background;

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in essence, their previous existence. Each school day they had to hang this part of their existence on the fence post as they walked through the front gate, and then pick it up, as if it were a hat, as they walked out.

Our present community college students were of the era in which they were punished for forgetting to hang their hat, i.e. speaking Spanish on the school campus. They were "unintentionally" made to feel ashamed of their culture and thus their parents. Because the schools were asking them to wear only the school hat, the confused students grew weary and had to make a choice. Those who chose their ~~parent's~~ school's hat had a better chance of completing school. Because most parents were not fluent in English, and Mexican-American teachers were a rare commodity, the complaints about the schools almost never reached the P.T.A., nor the principals, but remained in the barrio.

We contend that a student is experiencing an identity crisis if he has accepted only one of the two cultures in which he lives. Most of our students are in a mental state of "limbo" because they have not, to any recognizable degree, been taught the contributions of their forefathers in the making of America. This has taught them to feel shame for their being and their culture. They have, in many cases, taken the only avenue open to them and have chosen to completely adopt the dominant culture, thus rejecting the culture of their forefathers. We feel that if he only accepts the dominant culture he consciously or unconsciously is rejecting part of himself, his parents, his grandparents and their existence. The following paragraph is an example of such a student:

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> I don't want to be known as a Mexican-American, but only as an American. I was born in this country and raised among Americans. I think like an Anglo, I talk like one, and I dress like one. It's true I don't look like an Anglo, and sometimes I am rejected by them, but it would be worse if I spoke Spanish or said that I was of Mexican descent. I am sorry I do not get along well with my parents, but their views are old-fashioned. They still see themselves as Mexicans, and they do not understand me. Many times we have arguments, but I ignore them. In fact, I had to move away from my home because of our disagreements. I wish those people who are always making noise about being Mexican-American people would be quiet. We would all be better off if they just accepted things as they are. I just want a good education. I don't want to be poor or discriminated against.

If he only accepts the Mexican culture, he is denying the reality of his existence within the dominant society.

> I am proud of being Mexican-American. We have a rich heritage. Mexico is a great country, which is progressing fast, and it has a wonderful history and culture. My family is the most important thing in the world to me. I owe my parents everything, and I will never complain when they need me. I don't want to be like the Paddys because they don't care about their families; they just care about themselves and making money. They don't like anybody who is different. At school the teachers would ignore you if they knew you weren't going to college and most of us Mexicans couldn't afford to go. The things I learned at school were against what my parents had taught me. I had to choose my parents because now they are old and need my help and understanding. I know most people--even some Mexican-Americans--look down on us because we are Mexicans, and I hate them. It is unhealthy and unnatural to want to be something you are not.

The student who has a strong identification with the Mexican culture will very often find it difficult to relate to an Anglo counselor. Because of this it is important to have Chicano counselors as part of guidance personnel so that the student will have someone with whom he can identify. By having a person to identify with who is a functioning part of the dominant society, he may be able to

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gain some insight into his two worlds.

We feel that the student must accept both cultures as part of his daily living with a free inter-flow of beliefs, values and all the other controlling forces of one's own existence. This third paragraph is an example of an individual who has accepted both cultures.

> I am happy to be an American of Mexican descent. Because I am a Mexican, I learned to be close to my family, and they have been a source of strength and support for me. If things ever got too bad on the outside, I could always come to them for comfort and understanding. My Spanish also helped me a lot in my education and will also open a lot of doors for me when I look for a job. . . I feel all I have achieved I owe to the help of my parents, the encouragement of my teachers and the chance to live in a country like this one. I feel very rich and fortunate because I have two cultures rather than just one.

When the Mexican-American students get to college they finally have the opportunity to take Raza Studies courses where they learn that they have a history and culture worth recognizing and cherishing. Shame or indifference can be channeled toward pride and acceptance. Once he acknowledged his cultural background, he can begin to compare both cultures on equal terms and eventually understand and accept both cultures. It is our opinion that he is an individual with an identity crisis until the time that he can combine the best factors from each culture to form a richer, more beautiful one.

How does all this relate to me as a community college counselor?

First of all, it is true that we are not personally nor directly responsible for the student's past successes or failures. However, we do have a definite responsibility toward the student's present situation which will have a direct bearing on his present and his future successes and failures.

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Our counseling role is quite clear. We must give our counselees academic and personal counseling and help them with any other needs which might arise. But, how do we accomplish this if there is a communication gap?

Counselors can help bridge this communication gap in two ways: by educating themselves about the history and culture of the Mexican-American and by taking an active part in helping students resolve their identity crisis.

Asking counselors to read books or articles relating to the Chicano student's history and cultural background may seem a bit presumptuous, since the majority of the Chicano students entering the community college have not read these books. It must be kept in mind, however, that these students represent the product of the suffering, discrimination, alienation and assimilation which their parents and grandparents experienced while establishing, in part, the history of the Southwest.

We as counselors are obligated to read and attempt to understand the forces which have molded our present day Chicanos. Though the student himself may not understand his identity crisis, it is our duty to research and study the factors which have contributed to this crisis. With this effort on our part we will place ourselves at a level where we can truly begin to communicate effectively in helping the student resolve his cultural conflicts.

In addition, we feel that it is important for the student to be encouraged to study the history and culture of the Mexican-American. The taking of Raza classes is a recommended approach. It is important that we realize that the high schools, for the

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most part, have only taught the student the historic and cultural aspects of the dominant society.

At this point, we must work with the student's feelings of indecision, frustration and anger. These feelings might now exist because he has finally learned that his parents' history and culture are of great worth. He may feel that the school system, which he identifies with the dominant culture, has manipulated and deceived him by causing him to disrespect and feel ashamed of his parents and their culture.

The importance of our guiding them into our Raza classes is that they have the opportunity to correctly learn their historical background, and we as counselors can utilize our Raza instructors as resource agents in helping the student resolve any problems he may have in this new realization. We also feel that it is our obligation to help our students realize their full potential and unless we help the students recognize that their two cultures must be incorporated into one, with a mutual respect for each, we are not fulfilling our responsibility with these students.

It is important, then, for us to recognize that a communication gap could be the fault of both the counselor and the Mexican-American counselee. However, we should recognize that if we do not do our part in at least educating ourselves about the history and culture of La Raza, we will be at fault for widening even further the communication gap between the Chicano and the dominant society.

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